

The Last Great Cavalry Charge – Moreuil Wood & Rifle Wood, March 1918

By Richard Laughton



Lt. G. V. Laughton, M.C.

The Great War situation was about to change in Europe in the early months of 1918, as Germany now had at its disposal a large number of troops that had previously been serving on the Eastern Front. As reported by Nicholson ¹, the signing of the Russo-German Armistice on December 18, 1917 allowed the Germans to transfer 178 Divisions to the Western Front. During the late fall of 1917 and early winter of 1918, the Germans were preparing to launch major actions near St. Quentin, Arras, Armentières and Ypres with 71 Divisions, 32 of which took place in the action. The German offensive started on March 10, 1918 with an artillery assault on the French defences in Champagne and large scale troop movements by rail and road along the Arras-St. Quentin Line (see *Nicholson Map 10 attached*).

General Ludendorff (*Chief of Staff to Field-Marshal von Hindenburg*) planned to push a hole through the British front lines, then to split the British and French forces, driving the British back to the sea. The German's had the manpower and they had the initiative, the Allies were therefore facing a major setback in their gains of the previous year. Sheffield ² notes in his works on the war diaries and letters of British Field-Marshal Haig the following for Thursday March 21, 1918:

Numerically superior in guns and men, the German forces launched Operation Michael, a massive blow against British Fifth and Third Armies. Aided by dense fog, German forces made significant gains and took large numbers of prisoners, especially on the Fifth Army's front. Michael reopened mobile warfare and initiated the greatest crisis Haig had faced since October-November 1914.

Haig's plan called for General Foch (French Commander) "*or some other determined general who would fight*", to be given supreme control of the operations in France. Field-Marshal Haig wanted the French to support the British with at least 20 Divisions north of the Somme at Amiens. On March 25, 1918 Haig placed the British Fifth Army, south of the Somme, under French command.

During the same period, reference to the work of Humphries ³ reports on the situation at the Canadian GHQ. Canadian Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Currie was on leave in England when *Operation Michael* started on March 21, 1918. With great haste Currie was back in France the following day, after crossing the English Channel by torpedo boat destroyer. Currie reported that the 2nd Canadian Division was in reserve and then on March 23, 1918 the 2nd Division was ordered to rendezvous near Arras, with the 1st Division now in reserve and the 3rd and 4th Divisions on the line. On March 27, 1918 General Currie penned a special order in which he reported "*the enemy has gathered all his forces and struck a mighty blow at the British Army*". Currie reported that "*our Motor Machine Gun Brigade has already played a most gallant part and once again covered itself with glory*".

In concluding his special report Currie made one of his most famous calls of his career:

“Under the orders of our devoted officers in the coming battle you will advance or fall where you stand facing the enemy.

To those who will fall I say, ‘You will not die but step into immortality. Your mothers will not lament your fate but will be proud to have borne such sons. Your hand will be revered forever and ever by your grateful country and God will take you unto Himself.’

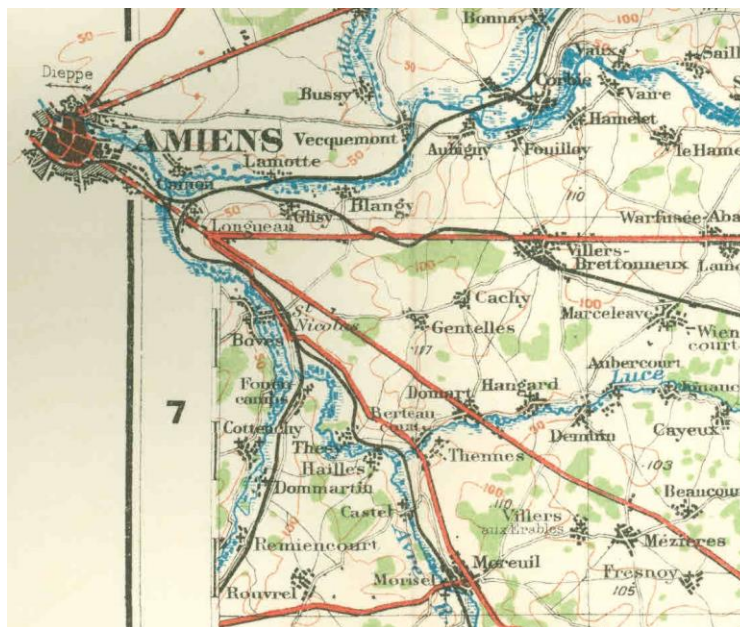
Canadians, in this fateful hour, I command you and I trust you to fight as you have ever fought with all your strength, with all your determination, with all your tranquil courage. On many a hard fought field of battle you have overcome this enemy. With God’s help you shall achieve victory once more.”

During the March 1918 German offensive the Canadian Corps was under the command of the British Army, located in the area of the British First Army which was outside the area of the main German attack. To assist the British Fifth Army during this difficult time, both British and Canadian Cavalry Brigades formed dismounted units to reinforce the British infantry and assist in the retirement of the British 18th Division across the Crozat Canal.

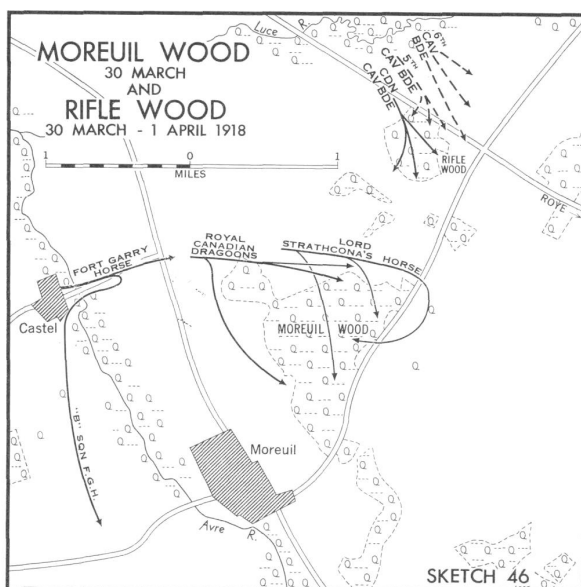
Nicholson ¹ reports that sections of the mounted Canadian Cavalry were called upon to support the British retirement and to fill important gaps in the British lines.

Canadian General Seeley’s brigade staff and 200 cavalrymen worked with two British brigades, a 500 strong combined force, “to re-establish infantry lines that had broken and delivering small-scale counter-attacks”.

On March 27, 1918 the Canadian brigade of the 2nd Cavalry Division was under British Command. On March 29, 1918 the 243rd German Division began occupying Moreuil Wood, on the right bank of the Avre River, some 12 miles southeast of Amiens.



War Office April 1918 Revised Edition Scale 1:250,000
North West Europe – Sheet 4



Nicholson: Official History of the Canadian Army
Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919
([see appended 2008 Google Earth Overlay](#))

The Canadian Cavalry Brigade was reported as the first on the scene at Moreuil Wood, with three mounted units of the Royal Canadian Dragoons, followed by attacks of mounted and dismounted units of Lord Strathcona's Horse.

The northern part of the woods was initially taken by the Canadians after "*considerable hand-to-hand fighting*". One squadron of the Fort Garry Horse went back across the Avre to entrap the Germans in enfilade fire, while a second squadron joined the Lord Strathcona's dismounted advance through the woods.

On March 31, 1918 the German counter-attacks recaptured most of Moreuil Wood and the smaller Rifle Wood to the north. On April 1, 1918 dismounted units of the 2nd Cavalry Division attacked the Rifle Wood in three waves. The final wave, 488 all ranks of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade, entered and cleared the wood.

The War Diary entries of the Canadian units involved in the actions of late March 1918 provide specific details of the actions that relate to the "*Last Great Cavalry Charge*" (*specific dates and comments selected by author*):

March 23, 1918: (Beaumont En Beine)

During the night orders are received to form a dismounted battalion from the Brigade – under the command of Lieut. Col. D. MacDonald, D.S.O., M.C. L.S.H. (RC) with Lieut. Powell as Adjutant.

March 28, 1918: (Arsy)

Information was received at 4:15 am that Germans had broken through at MONTIDIER – 2nd Can. Div. being at once ordered to move forward and fill the gap.

Lieut. Harvey V.C. in charge of a small patrol saw Germans in Fontaine – he immediately charged towards them and they withdrew in confusion. Fearing a possible ambush & seeing French infantry coming up behind Lieut. Harvey withdrew and found himself in an awkward predicament. The French mistook our party for Germans in disguise and actually placed them under guard ...

March 30, 1918: (Guyencourt)

Information was received that the French had capture MEZIERES and was advancing on AMIENS. Can. Cav. Bde. Was ordered to move forward if possible across the AVRE river and delay the enemy's advance. The brigade moved off in the following order - Royal Canadian Dragoons - L.S.H. (R.C.) – Machine Gun Sqdn. – Fort Garry Horse. Nearing BOIS DE SENECA on the right the Brigade

crossed the RIVER CASTEL and proceeded to the N. edge of BOIS DE MOREUIL. The wood was found to be held by the enemy and it was decided to drive him out. One Squadron R.C.D. immediately entered near the N.W. corner. Capt. Trotter's Squadron L.S.H. moved up dismounted to join them and although met by heavy rifle and M.G. fire they cleared the wood right through to the eastern face. Meanwhile Lieut. Flowerdew's squadron moved up mounted round the N.E. corner with the idea of cutting off the enemies retreat. As they crossed a steep bank they found themselves face to face with 2 lines of machine guns about 20 in all. Without any hesitation Lieut. Flowerdew gave the order to charge and led his squadron with great gallantry in spite of a murderous fire from the enemy who showed no sign of wavering. Although this squadron suffered heavy casualties their action had a great moral effect on those of the enemy who were still fighting in the wood. Hearing the clatter of hoofs behind them and thinking themselves surrounded – their resistance to our dismounted troops weakened considerably. Whilst this most successful mounted action was in progress – the remaining Sqdn. under Lieut. A. D. Morgan moved to the N.E. corner of the wood. Here they dismounted and advanced through the wood & occupied the southern face which they at once began to consolidate. Lt. Col. MacDonald personally directed the operation, touch being established with both flanks and Lieut. Trotter's squadron held in support. All of the survivors of Lieut. Flowerdew's squadron had by this time regained the wood and were on the left of our line. By this time – all Germans having been driven out of the wood, the enemy began a heavy bombardment with guns of every calibre and trench mortars.

In spite of heavy casualties, the enemy was allowed no peace. The orders were to deny the wood to the enemy and any attempt at a counter attack was nipped in the bud by our rifle, machine gun and Hotchkiss Rifle fire. The extreme south point of the wood was still in the hands of the enemy and doubtless this would have been a serious matter for our troops had it not been for the arrival of the 16th Lancers under Lt. Col. Brooke who had been the Bde. Major of the Canadian Brigade until a month previous. These troops joined the right of the R.C.D. and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy by a well executed counter attack which utterly foiled his attempt to recapture the wood from that direction. In spite of continuous heavy shelling and many casualties the wood was held all day and handed over intact to units of the 8th Infantry Division at about 8:30 pm.



Lord Strathcona's Horse – Royal Canadians
Hotchkiss Gun Section June 1916
[Library and Archives Canada Digital Collection](https://www.libraryandarchives.ca/digital-collection)

On the last day of March 1918 the Lord Strathcona's Horse rested in the Bois de Senecat. In the afternoon they did saddle up and "stood to" and ready if needed to assist or take advantage of a counter attack. It was not until 8 pm on the evening of March 31st that they were able to off-saddle and rest for the night. The war diary reports that some 5 hours later, word was received that the 2nd Canadian Division, to which the Canadian Cavalry Brigade was attached, would make a counter attack at dawn. An attack was planned on RIFLE WOOD, as possession of that wood provided the Germans with direct observation on the AMIENS and PARIS railway. Details are provided of this action in the war diary of April 1, 1918:

April 1, 1918: (Bois de Senecat)

The Cav. Brigade party moved forward in 3 waves F.G.H. - L.S.H. – R.C.D. The plan was as follows – after entering the wood F.G.H. would swing to their left – L.S.H. to their right until the two inner flanks joined each other, R.C.D. being held in reserve to reinforce wherever necessary. Artillery supplied a barrage of 8 minutes followed by concentrated M.G. fire which was kept up until our troops actually entered the wood.

The war diary of April 1st notes that many casualties were suffered in crossing the open areas between HOURGES and RIFLE WOOD. This was followed by difficulties experienced when entering the woods, due to the thick and heavy undergrowth. Despite problems keeping contact between the units, they reported many German's surrendering both themselves and their machine guns. Heavy hand to hand fighting continued in the wood until the south part of the wood was gained and consolidated. Many of the remaining Germans were reported as slaughtered by the Canadian's Hotchkiss Rifles. As the Germans were now clear of the woods, a heavy bombardment was commenced by the German artillery causing severe casualties. At 2 pm the L.S.H. handed over the newly captured area to British forces and then moved on foot to BOIS DE SENECA for the night.

On April 5, 1918 while resting at Bois de Senecat, the Lord Strathcona's Horse was addressed by General Sir. H. Rawlinson, Commander British 5th Army, complimenting them on their good work – particularly holding up the German advance on Amiens. "They had done their job and they had done it well", he said. The last great cavalry charge of Moreuil and Rifle Woods would go down in history as another momentous feat for the Canadians in the Great War of 1914-1919.

Nicholson ¹ reports that during the March 1918 offensive, the German army made a bulge 25 miles deep and 50 miles wide at the base but that the British Third and Fifth Armies fought the Germans to a standstill. It is reported that "*Ludendorff failed completely in his attempt to smash through the British line at Arras and regain the Vimy Ridge, though he attacked with 29 Divisions against eight*". The final analysis of the battle was that the German "*original plan was too ambitious and took too little account of their enemy's defensive capabilities*". They most certainly did not plan on meeting the Canadian Cavalry in Moreuil and Rifle Woods!

By the end of the fighting on April 5, 1918 the battle losses were reported as Germans 239,000; French 77,000 and British 163,500. The British casualties included the 618 Canadian casualties in the three cavalry regiments, 144 in the 1st Motor Machine Gun Brigade and 34 Railway Troops.

During this famous final cavalry charge, Lieutenant Gordon Muriel Flowerdew was awarded the Victoria Cross, although he unfortunately died of his wounds. A report on his heroic efforts is captured in the [Legion Magazine Series of Victoria Cross Winners](#) by Arthur Bishop ⁶ states the following:

The Canadian Cavalry Brigade, fighting a series of rearguard actions, was ordered to seize the Bois de Moreuil where the Germans had a commanding view of Amiens 12 miles away. C Squadron of the Lord Strathcona's Horse, under Lieutenant Gordon Flowerdew, had to ride around the northern corner of the wood and seal off the enemy.



[Gordon Muriel Flowerdew](#)

Flowerdew was awarded the VC for leadership in capturing the position, but he died from his wounds in hospital the next day and was buried in Namps-au-Val British Cemetery near the Picardy capital.

When Flowerdew and his men came up out of a draw and onto higher ground they saw, right in front of them, two lines of German soldiers about 60 strong and 200 yards apart with machine-guns on either flank and one in the centre. Flowerdew ordered a frontal attack.

When the Germans saw the Canadian cavalymen they let fly with everything they had. In one of the last cavalry assaults in history, reminiscent of the Charge of the Light Brigade, the Strathcona's attacked at full gallop.

The Germans threw hand grenades at their assailants and attacked with bayonets. The cavalry responded with their swords, hacking, slicing, piercing, stabbing as they charged through German lines. By this time, Flowerdew had lost 70 per cent of his men and was himself severely wounded in both thighs. But the Germans had taken a beating too and were forced to regroup. The Germans' advance had been stopped and Amiens saved.

ATTESTATION PAPER. No. *2506*
Folio.

CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

QUESTIONS TO BE PUT BEFORE ATTESTATION.
(ANSWERS.)

- What is your name? *Gordon Muriel Flowerdew*
- In what Town, Township or Parish, and in what Country were you born? *Billingford Norfolk England*
- What is the name of your next-of-kin? *Mrs Flowerdew, Middles*
- What is the address of your next-of-kin? *Billingford Norfolk England*
- What is the date of your birth? *Jan 2nd 1887*
- What is your Trade or Calling? *Rancher*
- Are you married? *No*
- Are you willing to be vaccinated or re-vaccinated? *Yes*
- Do you now belong to the Active Militia? *Yes*
- Have you ever served in any Military Force? *Yes B. Company 2nd Strathcona's Horse 4 months*
If so, state particulars of former Service.
- Do you understand the nature and terms of your engagement? *Yes*
- Are you willing to be attested to serve in the CANADIAN OVER-SEAS EXPEDITIONARY FORCE? *Yes*

(Signature of Man) *G. M. Flowerdew*
(Signature of Witness) *A. D. Gosses*

DECLARATION TO BE MADE BY MAN ON ATTESTATION.

I, *G. M. Flowerdew*, do solemnly declare that the above answers made by me to the above questions are true, and that I am willing to fulfil the engagements by me now made, and I hereby engage and agree to serve in the Canadian Over-Seas Expeditionary Force, and to be attached to any arm of the service therein, for the term of one year, or during the war now existing between Great Britain and Germany should that war last longer than one year, and for six months after the termination of that war provided His Majesty should so long require my services, or until legally discharged.

(Signature of Recruit) *G. M. Flowerdew*
Date *24th 9 -* 1914. (Signature of Witness) *A. D. Gosses*

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY MAN ON ATTESTATION.

I, *G. M. Flowerdew*, do make Oath, that I will be faithful and bear true Allegiance to His Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs and Successors, and that I will as in duty bound honestly and faithfully defend His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, in Person, Crown and Dignity, against all enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, and of all the Generals and Officers set over me. So help me God.

(Signature of Recruit) *G. M. Flowerdew*
Date *24th 9 -* 1914. (Signature of Witness) *A. D. Gosses*

CERTIFICATE OF MAGISTRATE.

The Recruit above-named was cautioned by me that if he made any false answer to any of the above questions he would be liable to be punished as provided in the Army Act.

The above questions were then read to the Recruit in my presence.

I have taken care that he understands each question, and that his answer to each question has been duly entered as replied to, and the said Recruit has made and signed the declaration and taken the oath before me, at *Valentin*, this *25th* day of *September* 1914.

(Signature of Justice) *W. R. A. D. Gosses*

I certify that the above is a true copy of the Attestation of the above-named Recruit.

A. C. Macdonnell (Approving Officer)

1914-214
H.Q. 1723-13

It was interesting to note from this research that while Lieutenant Flowerdew received the Victoria Cross for his actions, another Officer Lieutenant Frederick Maurice Watson Harvey received the Military Cross. What is significant is that Lieut. Watson was already a holder of the Victoria Cross, awarded for leading a cavalry charge on the village of Guyencourt, France, on March 27, 1917. That story is told by Bishop ⁷ in another of his [Legion Magazine Series of Victoria Cross Winners](#). Lieut. Harvey survived the war and returned to Canada where he commanded the Lord Strathcona's Horse (circa 1938). He died in Canada in 1980.

References:

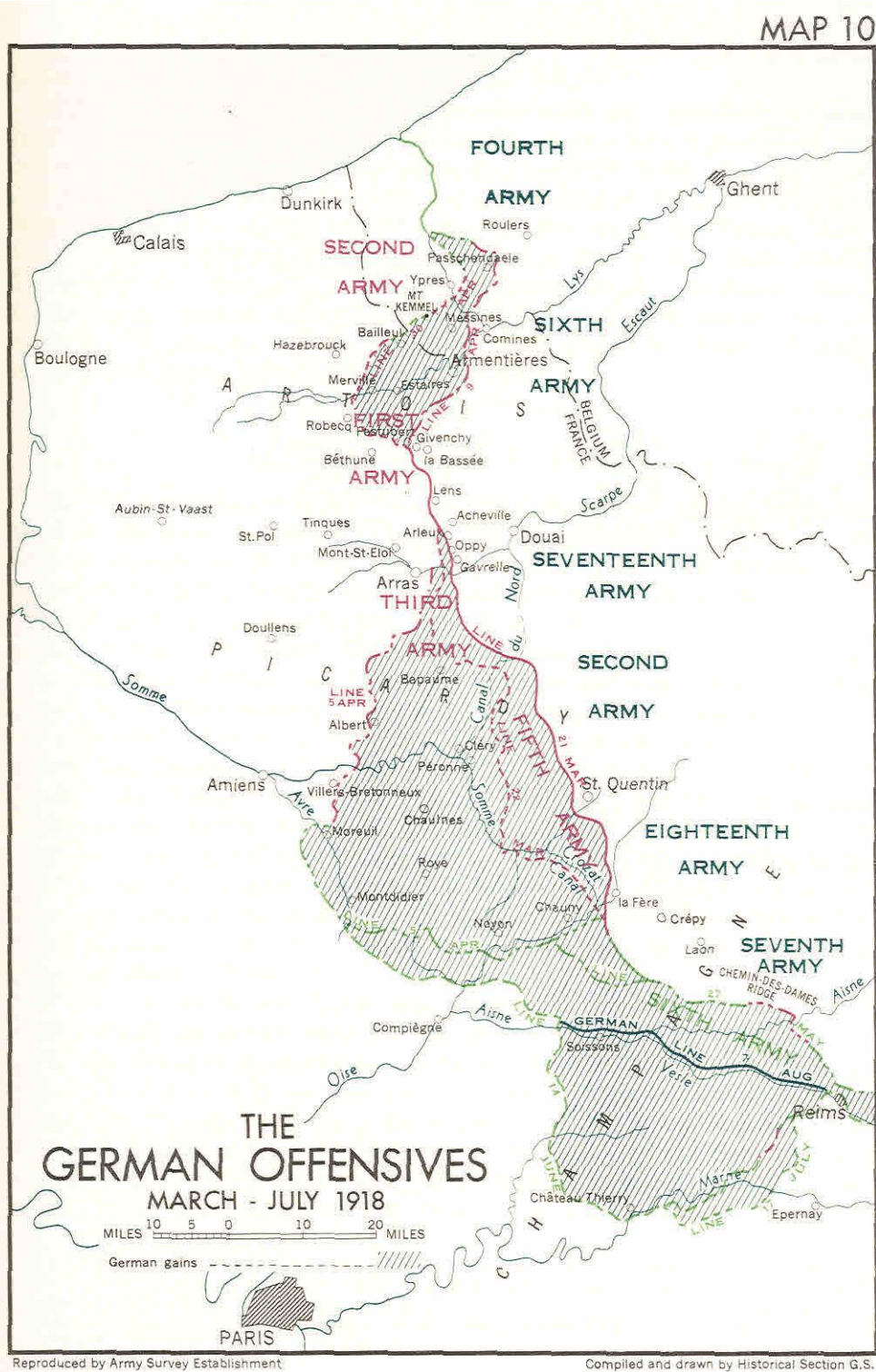
1. Nicholson, G. W. L. 1962. [Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War: Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919](#). Queen's Printer and Controller of Stationery, Ottawa, Canada.
2. Sheffield, G. and Boue, J.(ed). 2005. [Douglas Haig: War Diaries and Letters 1914-1918](#). The Orion Publishing Group Ltd., London, England.
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5. Laughton, R. V. 2008. [Moreuil Wood March 1918: Nicholson Overlay of Sketch 46](#). Google Earth Community.
6. Bishop, A. 2005. [Canada & the Victoria Cross, Cambrai and the Great Retreat: Part 10 of 18](#). Legion Magazine, Kanata, Ontario, Canada.
7. Bishop, A. 2004. [Canada & the Victoria Cross, Vimy and More: Part 6 of 18](#). Legion Magazine. Kanata, Ontario, Canada.

Notes: (updated January 2013)

1. A copy of all the "Laughton Articles & Essays" are now available of the Laughton web site at: <http://laughton.ca/index.php/publications/ww1/>
2. For a web based (hyperlinked) version of this particular article, please go to <http://laughton.ca/publications/ww1/pub3.pdf> . That version provides links to the maps, war diaries and other Internet Resources that are used in the article.
3. Additional information, such as larger scale maps and war diary extracts, that was compiled for the Laughton publications are stored on the MediaFire site at this location: <http://tinyurl.com/laughton-publications>
4. Flip-view copies of the Laughton publications are published in electronic PDF format on the ISSUU self-publishing web site.
All articles: <http://issuu.com/cefmatrix/docs>
This publication: http://issuu.com/cefmatrix/docs/the_last_great_cavalry_charge

5. An archive of the publication is held by Archive.org at:
<http://archive.org/details/TheLastGreatCavalryCharge-MoreuilWoodRifleWoodMarch1918>
6. This article was first published electronically in November 2008.
7. Information contained herein may be used by others to enhance the understanding of the roll Canada played in the Great War of 1914-1921 and to ensure that the men and women who served will be remembered for eternity. The use of this publication for commercial gain is strictly prohibited without the author's written permission.
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[Richard Laughton](#) is the grandson of two Great War Soldiers, each of whom served in the CEF and BEF. They are responsible for his interest in Great War Research. A scientist-engineer by trade, Richard now dedicates most of his research time to the Great War Matrix Project and by helping other researchers "Keep the Flame Alive".



from:

Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War (page 366)

Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919

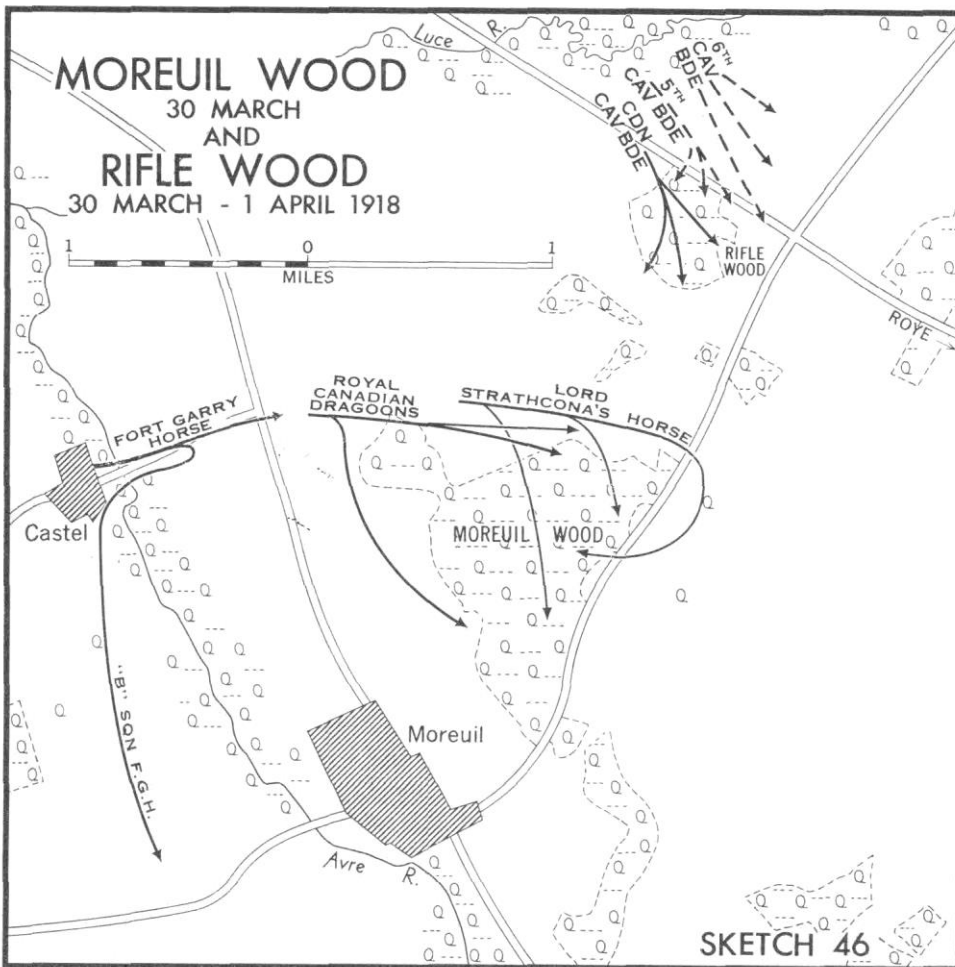
Colonel G. W. L. Nicholson, C.D.

Ottawa CANADA 1962

<http://cefresearch.ca/matrix/Nicholson/index.html>

Google Earth Community: Military (Moderated)

[Nicholson Map 10: The German Offensives 1918](#)



from:

Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War

Canadian Expeditionary Force 1914-1919

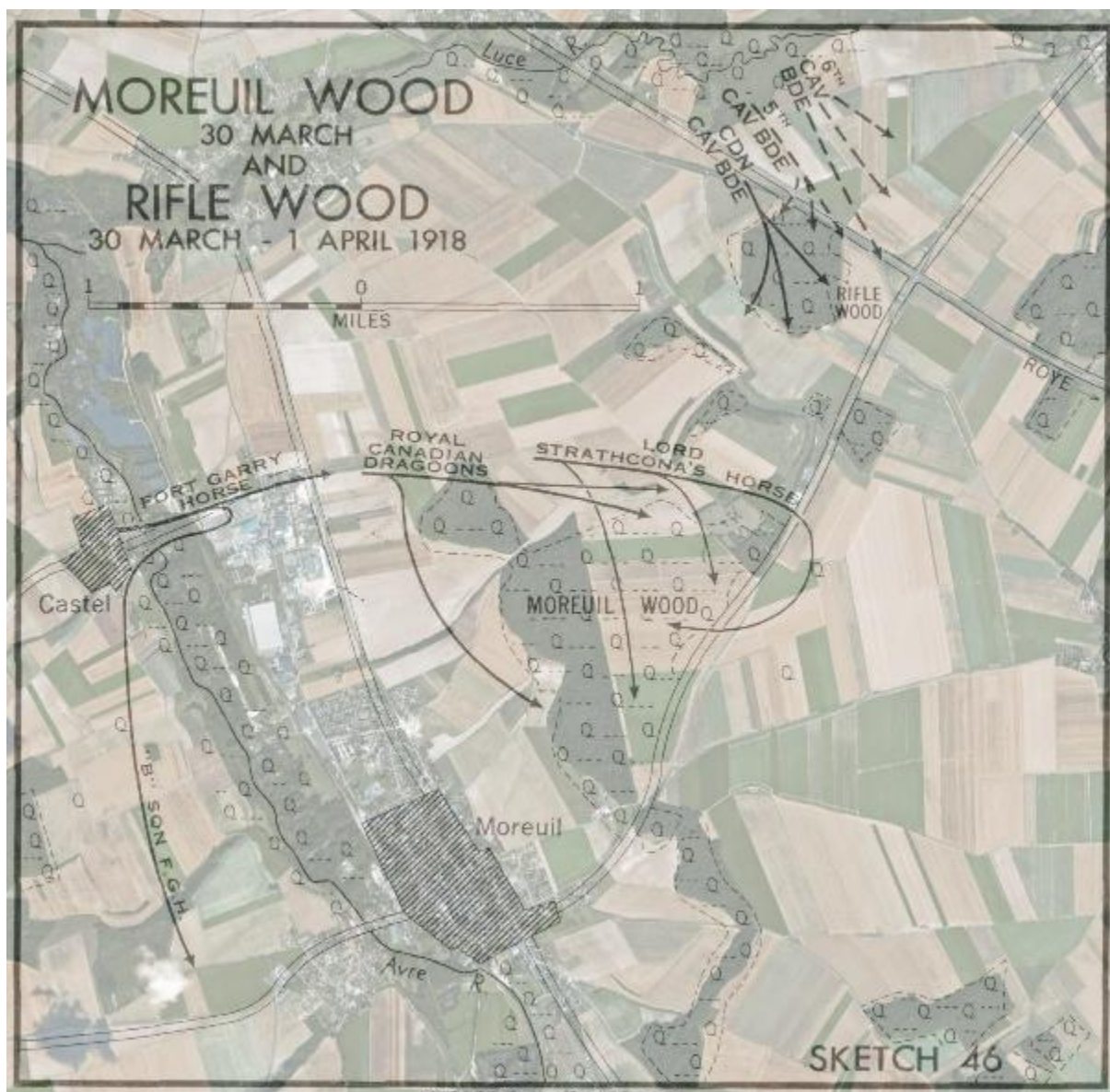
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[Nicholson Sketch 46: Moreuil Wood and Rifle Wood](#)



prepared by:

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Canadian Expeditionary Force Study Group

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